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General and complete disarmament: effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium

Effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum*

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* This information was received after the submission of the main report. The number of replies now stands at 18.

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II. Replies received from Governments

Germany

[Original: English]
[5 August 2010]

1. In light of the public debate on the question of whether the utilization of ammunitions containing depleted uranium could pose risks to humans and the environment, Germany has supported General Assembly resolutions 62/30 and 63/54 on the understanding that further information on and research into the effects of depleted uranium on human health and the environment could be of help in finding a suitable response to this issue.

2. With regard to the use of armaments and ammunition containing depleted uranium by armed forces, Germany wishes to inform the Secretary-General that the German Federal Armed Forces are not stockpiling nor have they ever used armaments or deployed ammunitions containing depleted uranium.

3. In view of German participation in joint international military operations, Germany initiated two scientific studies, both published in 2007, with a view to assessing the potential negative effects of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium on human health and the environment. Germany informed the Secretary-General of the studies in its 2008 report (see A/63/170). In both studies, significant effects on human health and the environment could not be detected. Since that time, the German Government has not initiated further studies.

4. The issue of ammunitions containing depleted uranium attracts particular attention from certain German non-governmental organizations. The German Government stays in contact with them and takes the concerns of civilians very seriously.

5. Germany is participating, at the European level, in a study by the European Commission's Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks (SCHER), which is examining the effects of ammunitions containing depleted uranium. The Committee is currently working on an opinion on the environmental and health risks posed by depleted uranium. This new study was recently subject to a so-called "public consultation", and the final version worked out by the Scientific Committee is now available to the public. The final report does not detect significant effects of ammunitions and armaments containing depleted uranium on human health and the environment.

6. The Federal Republic of Germany will continue to act with due diligence regarding the issue of ammunitions containing depleted uranium.

Mauritius

[Original: English]
[23 July 2010]

With regard to the effect of the use of armaments and ammunition containing depleted uranium, it is held that depleted uranium is used to make defensive armour plate and armour-piercing ammunition. Given that it is both radioactive and toxic, depleted uranium has long-term health effects not only on personnel in combat

operations, but also on civilians, flora, fauna and the environment. Furthermore, the decontamination of soil is a costly exercise, and not all countries have the necessary expertise and resources to carry out such a process.

III. Replies received from agencies and organs of the United Nations system

United Nations Environment Programme

[Original: English]
[21 July 2010]

1. Depleted uranium, the main by-product of uranium enrichment, is a chemically and radiologically toxic heavy metal. It is mildly radioactive, with about 60 per cent of the activity of natural uranium. This dense metal is used in munitions for its penetrating ability and as a protective material for armoured vehicles. The health effects resulting from depleted uranium exposure depend on the route and magnitude of exposure, as well as characteristics such as particle size, chemical form and solubility. Where depleted uranium munitions have been used, the penetrators, penetrator fragments, and jackets or casings can be found lying on the surface or buried at varying depth, leading to the potential contamination of air, soil, water and vegetation from depleted uranium residue.

2. To evaluate and address the potential contamination of the environment by depleted uranium, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) conducted a series of environmental assessments and measurements on depleted uranium-targeted sites in the Balkans, following the conflicts in the 1990s.[1] From 2000 to 2003, three separate assessments were carried out in Kosovo,[2] Serbia and Montenegro,[3] and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[4]

3. Throughout these assessments, UNEP maintained close cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the World Health Organization (WHO). According to their respective mandates, all radiological calculations were performed by IAEA, while WHO was responsible for calculating the toxicology of the depleted uranium.

4. The main scientific findings were consistent across the three assessments. Measurements taken at the depleted uranium sites showed that, even in areas with widespread depleted uranium contamination, the overall levels of radioactivity were low and within acceptable international standards, with no immediate dangers from either particle-based or waterborne toxicity. However, major scientific uncertainties persisted regarding the long-term environmental impacts of depleted uranium, particularly with respect to long-term groundwater contamination. Because of these scientific uncertainties, UNEP called for a precautionary approach to the use of depleted uranium, and recommended that action be taken to clean up and

[1] For more on UNEP's activities on depleted uranium see: http://www.unep.org/conflictsanddisasters/UNEPintheRegions/PastProgrammes/DepletedUranium/tabid/308/language/en-US/Default.aspx.

[2] Available at http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/uranium.pdf.

[3] Available at http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/duserbiamont.pdf.

[4] Available at http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/BiH_DU_report.pdf.

decontaminate the polluted sites. It also called for awareness-raising among local populations and future monitoring.

5. In addition to assessment activities, UNEP experts provided capacity-building to countries upon formal request. In 2005-2007, at the request of the Iraqi Government, UNEP provided capacity-building training to Iraqi specialists, in Amman and Geneva, on the assessment and management of depleted uranium exposure.[5] In this regard, staff from the Radiation Protection Centre of the Iraqi Ministry of the Environment were trained and equipped to conduct depleted uranium field assessments and to develop programmes and policies on risk reduction and clean-up. The staff members were provided with suitable radiation field measurement and health and safety equipment, and were trained in its use. In addition, UNEP compiled all available information into a structured database that included scientific data from the 2003 conflict as well as essential data from the 1991 Gulf War. The database was provided to the Iraqi planning authorities as a tool for land-use planning and prioritizing depleted uranium clean-up activities.

6. The United Nations Environment Programme hopes that the body of knowledge gained from its assessment and capacity-building activities since the publication of its first report in the year 2001 will help countries to address potential risks related to the contamination of air, soil, water and vegetation from the use of depleted uranium in times of conflict, and stands ready to provide further assistance upon request.

[5] Technical report available at http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/Iraq_DU.pdf.